



INSIDE: OBSERVATIONS ON THE MARCH FOR SCIENCE

PLUS: IS SCIENCE RELEVANT IN AFRICA?, GENERATIONAL INCLUSION:
SHATTERING STEREOTYPES, AND MORE

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REACTIONS OF VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS TO THE NEW ADMINISTRATION IN WASHINGTON, DC

By David Ellis, Robert Mac West, and Dan Martin

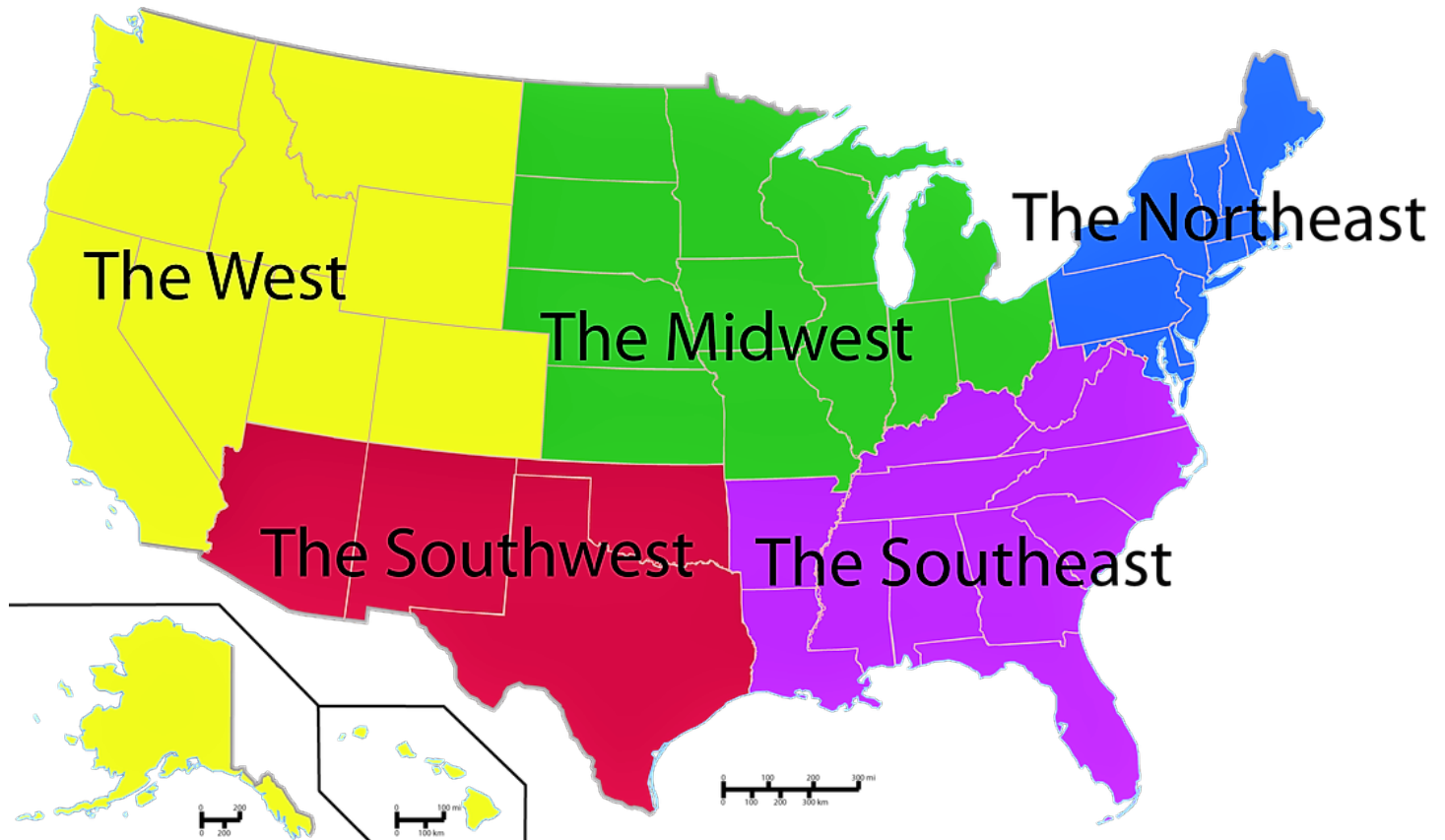


Figure 1: The five regions of the United States.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the aggregation of 38 (as of this writing) personal conversations that David Ellis, Robert Mac West, and Dan Martin conducted with current directors of U.S. science centers, natural history museums, history museums, children's museums, art museums, zoos, and aquariums during the month of May, 2017. These institutions are located in 22 states and the District of Columbia, thus representing significant geography as well as institutional diversity. Sorted by geographic region, there are nine in the Northeast, five in the Southeast, ten in the Midwest, five in the Southwest, and nine in the West.

The survey was intentionally conducted at a challenging time in U.S. social and economic life. A new and frequently controversial administration is in place and suggestions of potential changes in federal funding and/or support of programming important to our institutions have quickly

emerged. As we wound up our interviews, the 2018 presidential budget proposal was issued, potentially exacerbating some of the reactions below. This is on top of the many other societal and technological changes and trends that all institutions are currently tracking, encountering, and responding to in many ways.

The conversations were broadly organized into two parts. The first, by far the largest, focused on the institution with which we were talking and its current actions or lack thereof, and the second on perspectives of what is occurring broadly in the world of informal learning institutions.

With respect to the engaged institution, discussions looked at current and forthcoming operations, on reactions of board and staff to the current environment, and responses/initiatives that the institution is currently implementing or looking to plan/implement in the near future.

It comes as no surprise that there were great differences among responses to the current situation. The location of the institution and its regional political and social environment have been and continue to be major determinants of its actions and positions, as are internal circumstances such as the composition of the board of directors, major funding and support sources, ongoing planning and strategizing activities, exhibition and programming approaches, etc.

For example, institutions in very conservative areas have learned how to operate in that environment and see less potential change than those in decidedly liberal locations. If an institution has earned income that provides the majority of its operating budget, it is less dependent on grants and government funding and their budgets and pressures.

This report does not specify which individuals and institutions participated in the study. It was made clear prior to the conversation that individuals and institutions would remain anonymous. Thus, people felt free to be candid and straightforward knowing that they and their institutions' identity and/or issues/challenges/actions would not be identified and singled out.

I. What are institutional reactions to the new administration?

In general: Institutions are proceeding as normally, either waiting to see what happens and/or enhancing their commitment to inclusion and fact-based science. Some institutions are supporting staff who wish to participate in marches, demonstrations, etc., while others are decidedly not.

Specifics:

- a. At one institution, an exhibition has been postponed; at another institution, plans to change an exhibit have been put on hold; at a third, greater emphasis on science is being written into an exhibit.
- b. Some institutions are developing contingency budgets; others are reducing dependence on federal funding.
- c. Some institutions are working on guidelines for staff on what can be said, while one is contemplating how to react if staff members subject to DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) are removed.
- d. In a culturally specific institution, there is real fear which has generated the need for staff training, ground rules, etc.
- e. An institution has determined that it must make its mission more impactful.

- f. One institution has devised a special way to highlight inclusiveness through a game; another, a community-owned outdoor facility, will be putting up banners in support of the facility and the city as places of inclusion.
- g. An institution is attempting to shift its exhibit funding from NSF and federal funders to local resources where possible, while another gains funding through environmental mitigation regulations that could change.
- h. Several museums have had emergency staff meetings.
- i. One museum declared: "Our mantra is nothing is normal."
- j. Institutions in gateway cities for international leisure travelers are concerned that they may see a decline in revenue from a decline in visitation.
- k. Institutions in cities with large immigrant populations, especially Hispanic ones, are concerned that years of marketing to those populations that have led to attendance and revenue gains and improved community relations are now in jeopardy.
- l. Facilities with an environmental mission are concerned about administration plans to reduce or eliminate environmental research programs supportive of their mission and a source of exhibit data.
- m. An institution's university-based research collaborations have been jeopardized as the university, and their shared programs, rely on foreign graduate students who have not returned or do not expect to return for the next semester.
- n. In some communities, institution directors and staff are discussing these issues and collaborative ideas among themselves.

II. Has the institution's board taken any action relative to statements or actions of the new administration?

In general: Almost all have taken no action, as yet.

Specifics:

- a. Many institutions spoke of boards carefully avoiding any discussion that could be seen as political. While an individual's politics may typically be left at the boardroom door, even in conservative areas, many if not most wealthy board members are conservative but not all are supportive of the Administration, further complicating conversation and action.
- b. A lack of social empathy has led some board members to question actions more aggressively and shape what comes forward to the board.
- c. A board has stated that it wants to be more risk-averse by increasing the endowment.
- d. One institution mentions actively lobbying against the proposed 2018 budget.

III. Has the institution's staff taken any actions responding to developments emanating from the new administration?

In general: Most institutions reported that their staffs are concerned and talking among themselves. This has not been the case in some politically conservative areas and “purple” areas where politics is simply not discussed among staff. Immigration has emerged as an interesting issue.

Specifics:

- a. In many cases staff have taken specific actions including participation in marches, in particular the April 22 March for Science; some institutions supported staff participation in local and national marches while taking no formal or public institutional position.
- b. Public political involvement by board members has resulted in some staff self-censoring.
- c. A faculty member affiliated with a museum has decided to only accept invitations to speak where he will be speaking with audiences that do not understand what science is, how it works, and what scientists do.
- d. The tenor of conversations has changed—some people are frightened.
- e. There is more activism by staff on social media.
- f. Staff feel wounded, terrified, frightened—feel effects on their institution, their community, as well as personal.

IV. Has philanthropy to the institution been affected?

In general: Most institutions have not seen, as yet, any significant impact on philanthropy.

Specifics:

- a. A foundation that is “sunsetting” may make a major contribution for a purpose that would otherwise have been expected to be funded through federal grants.
- b. Board members are worried about a possible elimination of charitable deductions.
- c. Some board members are more supportive of NEH and NEA when informed that a significant portion of those program funds come back to the states for programs in the states.
- d. An ethnically specific institution reports that donations are up.
- e. Some institutions have changed their message to be more forceful in asking for support for exhibits and projects related to climate change and environmental issues because they expect donors to be more passionate

about the topic and understand the threat.

V. Other comments:

1. Many institutions mentioned the following areas as ones to which they were devoting increased attention:
 - a. communication
 - b. community events
 - c. rededication to values
 - d. strengthening mission
 - e. audience diversification
 - f. increased offsite activities
 - g. local funding sources (rather than national)
 - h. the need to become third places (places to socialize outside of home and work)
2. Different kinds of fears were expressed:
 - a. cuts to NEA, NEH, NSF, IMLS, Department of Energy, Department of the Interior, NOAA, NASA, NPR
 - b. loss of the charitable deduction in the U.S. tax code
 - c. hate crimes against a specific museum
 - d. loss of jobs, staff on “soft-money” from grants, contracts, and other sources
3. Relief expressed regarding the continuing resolution for funding through the end of the fiscal year but concerns about 2018 budget elements
4. Suggestions that museums need to connect better with their local communities, both for funding and political support and to attract more diverse audiences and supporters

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ON THE COVER:

On April 22, over one million people in 66 countries on all seven continents participated in the March for Science. The Denver March for Science took place in Civic Center Park and the adjacent downtown streets, near the State Capital building. People donned humorous costumes and carried signs that emphasized the importance of science for the future.

Full story on page 14.

